Man’s most distinctive insights, not the least of which is that in any given epoch the values and ideas of the dominant or ruling class appear – or are made to appear – natural and universal, and for that reason not subject to challenge except on terms that do not threaten to dominance.

That is a thought worth remembering, as the university itself finds itself caught up in local as well as global currents of social, political and cultural dispute – all magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not only made us more aware of social and economic disparity within and between societies, but also reminded us that a thriving economy can come at a cost, in some circumstances, must be reckoned in human lives.

This is a surfeit time for Queesns, as it is and must be for all institutions that derive their authority and identity from the dominant culture, from tradition and history, and from their alliance with prevailing ideas about the economy and the state. I say this because there can be no true path to reconciliation with indigenous peoples, and no satisfying response to students who have experienced racism or homophobia at Queens, without the university recognizing its complicity in the broader oppressive and exclusionary structures about which protesters complain.

Universities are to varying degrees capable of admitting their mistakes and apologizing for acts of unintentional or even intentional discrimination. They are also increasingly sensitive to the systemic operation of these things. And sometimes they are able to make significant operational changes that prove satisfactory to the individuals, or classes of individuals, affected. At the same time, however, calls for real and fundamental change typically persist beyond measures of this sort, to which a common and largely rhetorical university response is to deny racism and homophobia as alien invaders that must be driven out.

If these problems are sometimes alien they are also always endemic, implicated, in and sustained by other aspects of the university ethos that we treat as normal and inessential. For example, the concept of dispossession in power, for example, that we ignore in declaring freedom of speech an achievable and unproblematic good, or in understanding academic merit that presumes the possibility of entirely objective assessment, something by definition impossible to achieve when it is a human subject doing the assessing.

That universities in the Western tradition have been around for nine hundred years certainly makes them interesting, but it is evidence neither of their perfection nor of their timeliness. Queen’s today looks nothing like the University of Bologna in 1388: like that first Alpine-Mediterranean State, it has been shaped by its culture and by time, has answered the needs of its community, and reflected in its values a cultural and political consensus from which some aspiring members have always felt excluded. Fundamentally, one component of our institutional memory has always been the struggle against the process of construction is a tacit belief in our “unconstructedness.” As if many of the things which define us as the natural and universal attributes of a university, not the result of human choice at a particular historic moment.

When students are strengthened by the Black Lives Matter movement and emboldened to speak out about their experience of racism at Queens, they are reminded that their university is a place where the treatment of the university through the choices we make and therefore have the potential to remake it according to the principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and indigeneity. When indigenous and LGBTQ students tell us we do not feel safe on campus, they are demanding that we think beyond CCTV cameras and heightened security – important though those measures might be – and question some of the foundational assumptions of our institutional being, interrogate what most of the time we accept as natural and universal.

I implied at the outset that there is a form of questioning that is enveloped by – and therefore unresisting to – the status quo. Universities take to be the high art, declaring the asking of questions and the pursuit of answers the essence of their mission. At the same time, however, the terms within which questions must be asked and the forms of evidence that can be adduced in answering them are considerably more tightly than the academy would typically care to admit. In part, this is because they are constrained by transparently legalistic assumptions that are not only circularly self-serving but also tied to the ideology of the university as a privileged and protected institution, and not didactic in any meaningful sense. It is a form of complicity in the marginalization of those who are excluded from the university and our decision-making processes, and our decision-making process is the way to change, albeit the most effective and least necessary. On this front we must do more.

The university is not a policing and surveillance state. Most universities feel public pressure to police and surveil student activity. It makes sense that they do. We are not a social institution that is made up of “students.” In this way, we are not the primary recipient of public criticism. We are a university, not a social club. We are not the primary recipient of public criticism.

But there is an important role for universities. We are the custodians of the public good. We are the custodians of the public good. We are the custodians of the public good.

When it comes to digital privacy, the university is not the primary recipient of public criticism. The primary recipient of public criticism is the government. We are not the primary recipient of public criticism. We are not the primary recipient of public criticism.

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